

Paul C. Pollei

History



Brigham Young University School of Music
Professor of Piano/Literature/Pedagogy and Music Theory, 1961-2008
Interview July 1, 2009

Education:

McCune School of Music, 1950-51
University of Utah, 1954-1960
Sherwood School of Music, 1960
Eastman School of Music, 1961-1962
University of Southern California, 1970
PhD, Florida State University, 1972-1975

Interview with Mike Ohman-July 1, 2009

The intent of this interview is to obtain your personal history. Tell about your very early childhood—where you were born and raised; what got you started in music; your education, your marriage, and your family. In the process, tell how you came to BYU; share some of your dreams and aspirations; name some of the faculty during your tenure.

I was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, and lived in the same house my entire life, something unique, I believe. I was the second of four boys, and we were all very close. As one can imagine, we were very scrappy and also enjoyed good times together.

I started studying music when I was six years old. I asked for a piano for my birthday. My parents were not wealthy, but they purchased a huge “grandma piano”—an upright grand that weighed five hundred pounds. The only time I ever heard my father use profanity was when my mother said to him, “Eric, it’s time to clean behind the piano, so would you please move the piano.” That happened once a year, and it was a big chore.

I studied with the neighborhood music teacher, a close friend of my mother. I remember going to my lesson in a little red wagon. I remember having a few lessons from her, and then all of a sudden I was graduated to a better teacher. That

turned into a good experience, and when I was nine years old, I played my first “recital” under her direction and enjoyed it very much.

I made progress and continued with additional piano lessons. During my teenage years, I remember being “on and off,” meaning that some days I liked to practice, and some days I didn’t. Of course it was always “If you don’t practice, you will have to stop piano.” I would cry, and then call up my teacher and say, “I don’t want to stop.”

Then I was sent to a very famous teacher at what was called the McCune School of Music, an official music and art school housed in a wonderful mansion that has never changed in its architecture or design. It’s located not far from the Salt Lake Temple. The school taught art and ballet, but music was the major subject. My teacher happened to be Mabel Borg Jenkins. Her claim to fame as a teacher was that she had been the teacher of Grant Johannesen. Because he was quite a bit older than I am, I didn’t know him as a colleague, but eventually he fit into the history of Mrs. Jenkins at this school. She was highly acclaimed, and a very good teacher.

The director of the school was my grandmother’s brother, Tracy Cannon, the Tabernacle Organist. We called him “Uncle Tracy.” He would visit us at our house when I was a teenager, and every time he came, he’d say, “Oh, I want to

hear you play.” Every time he’d say that, it put the fear of God in me. I became very nervous, because I was just a young teenager. If I played a wrong note, he would say right in the middle of my playing, “No, that’s a B-flat,” or “You missed that note!” or something like that. He would chastise me as I was playing. That’s an interesting memory, because he was a nice man, and obviously a great musician. He had a distinguished reputation, being both the organist and director of the McCune School of Music. This was also the period of Alexander Schreiner, who lived in our neighborhood. Eventually, when I went to the University of Utah, one of my first classes was organ lessons from Alexander Schreiner. The bishop had called me as ward organist when I was a teenager and handed me five dollars in front of the congregation: “Now go take some organ lessons from Alexander Schreiner.” That was not a pleasant experience, I must say.

To my knowledge, Alexander Schreiner was not a great teacher. I’ve discussed that with many people, so I don’t think I’m saying anything out of order. He was a great musician! Some people who have studied the history of music in the Church say that in their estimation, he was probably our greatest LDS musician, certainly among the greatest. I have that memory, as not only was he my teacher, but I was his paperboy. He scared “the you know what out of me” every time I had to knock on the door and collect money from him, which was the procedure for paperboys in those days.

I did my undergraduate studies at the University of Utah, majoring in piano. I had several teachers, one of them being Reid Nibley, another being Paul Banham. A great teacher who really saved my life was a woman by the name of Helen Folland, a wonderful theory teacher and

also a superb piano teacher. She was stern, but also very wonderful as a pedagogue. She would say to me, “Paul, you have to take dictation an augmented fourth higher, because everything is too easy for you.” She caught me right off the bat, knowing that I had perfect pitch and that I was being very lazy about dictation. Then she would write “E,” or “failing,” or something like that on my theory papers. I thought, *I’m smarter than this*. Then one day she took me by the hand and said, “You’re too smart to have E’s and F’s. Let’s save you.” I remember her saying that: “Let’s save you.”

Then she took me into her room and coached me one-on-one. She was an instinctive teacher who recognized what talent students possessed; then she would take them and refine them. I owe her much, because I graduated from the university.... thanks to her.

I made up my mind that I wanted to go to graduate school. By then I was married. I met my wife, Norene, believe it or not, in the ward where I lived all my life. Her father had passed away, so she moved into the ward as a newcomer with her mother. She graduated from high school in Salmon, Idaho and then moved to Salt Lake right away. As she said, “I graduated and was on the bus to Salt Lake City the next day. I don’t want to live in a small town the rest of my life! I want to go to college.”

She came to Salt Lake City and immediately sought out a home where she could reside. I think she cleaned houses, anything she could do to earn her keep, and she made it—she went to school! Eventually, she moved to our neighborhood where we became acquainted.

I later served a mission in France. Part way through my mission, I received a

letter from her. She said, “I’m going to serve a mission.” I had proposed to her by letter, and we had a good understanding. So I ended up waiting for her! She served in San Francisco and Northern California.

When she returned home, we married. I had graduated from the University of Utah by then, and it was time to think about graduate school. I really had one goal in mind: Eastman was the place to study. I had heard many associates say that Eastman School of Music was the place to go. In those days, you didn’t think of the whole world going to graduate school; you went to very select places. I applied to three schools, and Eastman was the one that accepted me. That made me very happy. We married in 1960, and immediately left for graduate school.

We drove across the country in an old Chevrolet and slept in the parks at night in the summertime. We were just poor college kids, and nobody was going to make life difficult for us! We arrived at Eastman and needed an apartment. We saw a sign on an apartment directly opposite from Eastman School of Music: “Apartment for Rent.” I said, “That’s very convenient. Let’s go see how much the rent is.”

The rent was \$75.00, and the apartment had a piano in it—another “grandma’s upright.” I said, “This is made to order. Now I can practice. Let’s do it.”

Norene began employment and supported me through Graduate School. We put down \$75 for the apartment, and for all the cockroaches that went with it. Newell K. Brown had rented the apartment prior to us. David Dalton had also been there. Another musician-composer student was there as well, Larry Lyon, who composed many anthems for the Church, along with several other projects.

Soon, another BYU faculty member to be, Harrison Powley, found our team of LDS student musicians. Harrison and I became home teaching companions and good friends while we were at school. My tenure there was short, because I received my master’s degree after one ‘year study’. We had our first baby in Rochester, and then I wanted to begin teaching. I needed some income! We needed food to eat!

I applied for a high school teaching job in a little community about ten miles from Watertown, in upstate New York. I taught girls’ chorus and theory there, which was quite interesting. I enjoyed the work; therefore, I signed on for the second year.

Then came an interesting transition: We had a baby, it was June after the first teaching year, and we were ready for a vacation. We had a job for the coming September, so we said, “Why don’t we go home?”

Our families hadn’t seen our baby, so we said, “Let’s drive across the United States. Now we have a car we can trust.”

We drove to Utah and stayed with my family in Salt Lake City. We were free of commitments. My mother said, “Why don’t you go and visit BYU and see your cousin, who I think teaches in the music department?”

I asked, “Who is that?”

She said, “His name is Clawson Cannon.” (He was then serving as Associate Dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communication).

He was actually my mother’s cousin. I didn’t know him well, because he hadn’t grown up in Utah. He grew up in Iowa, but now he was teaching at BYU.

I asked my mother, "Where's BYU?" I'd grown up in Utah, and I did know where BYU was, but I didn't know anything about the school. It was a foreign place to me. We, at the U of U didn't pay attention to BYU! There was no freeway to Provo at that time, which made the schools worlds apart.

I made an appointment with Clawson. When I arrived at BYU, he was very welcoming. He handed me a hardhat and said, "They're building the library and the fine arts building. I'd like to show them to you, and take you around the campus." I believe the Wilkinson Center had just been completed.

Clawson was very proud of what was happening to BYU. The entire campus used to be the Lower Campus, and now this was becoming a new campus. I remember that we literally climbed into the new Fine Arts Building and walked around the steel frame. We were on the third and fourth levels, and down below us were the pits, still unfinished. Being a musicologist, I could tell that Clawson was very excited about the fact that there would be room for acquisitions, music, and materials. He was very excited about BYU and the new building. In a very casual way, he said, "Maybe you would like to come here and teach." I didn't know whether it was really a job offer or not. He was simply telling me about the future. I interpreted his comment as possibly being an offer for a job. However, I wasn't looking for a job, as I had a position in Watertown, New York.

When I returned to Salt Lake that afternoon, my parents wanted to know about our meeting.

They asked, "How was your day in Provo?"

I answered, "Fine."

"Did you meet Clawson?"

"Yes."

"Did you have a good time?"

"Yes. He showed me around the new campus."

"Is that all?"

"I think he offered me a job."

"What?" They were very surprised. "What did you say?"

"I have a job in New York, so I didn't even accept what may have been an offer."

"Well, you're crazy, aren't you?" As if to say, *What's the matter with you? You could come and be home with us. We would be in the same state.* "I think you should call him back and have a little chat with him."

That's exactly what happened. I called him the next day—and the rest is history. I went right to the offer. I don't remember anything other than that: it seems as if the next day I was on the faculty at BYU. That was in 1961.

Crawford Gates was the first person I could relate to, he being the Chairman of the Music Department. As he was on leave of absence, Clawson was the Acting Chair of the department. I was assigned to an office on the Lower Campus, which is now the Provo Library (formerly it was the BY High School Building).

I was assigned to teach piano and theory when they realized I had a degree in Music Theory from the University of Utah. They also knew I had been at Eastman because

Clawson had been an Eastman graduate as well. John Halliday, BYU choral professor, had the first doctorate in theory from Eastman, so there were heritage factors working together.



Pollei, with a few of his students.

I remember teaching two sections of Theory, one at nine and the other at ten, in the old Social Hall of the Knight Mangum Building. I would finish those assignments, get in my car, and drive to the old lower campus building, where I taught Piano to fifty students every week.

Such a load sounds mind-boggling: doing all the home work—correcting and what have you, for two theory classes—and then teaching *fifty* piano lessons a week.

The first summer, when there were no classes at BYU, I went on tour with Lawrence Sardoni, a wonderful colleague and violinist. We toured the

Intermountain West—Idaho, Wyoming and Montana. We would perform a concert, and then go to the next city. I don't even remember whether we were paid for our concerts or not; it just seemed like a nice thing to be doing.

When I came home, I did not feel well. Lawrence kept saying, "I do not want to be responsible for you being sick, for taking you around and not taking care of you." So he would bring me back on weekends, and then we would go out again.

We played major concerts, me at the piano and Lawrence on the violin—Brahms sonatas, Grieg sonatas (which I remember *very* well), etc. I played solos. The two of us just made an evening of it. It was nice, and Lawrence was a wonderful colleague and violinist.

Finally, toward the end of the summer, I had to go see a doctor.

That was a not-so-nice-time, spending many weeks in the hospital.

Following my traumatic end-of-summer, I was finally able to resume my work. In fact, I can remember the first selection I played at BYU: It was with Richard Ballou, French horn, Lawrence Sardoni, violin, and I, piano, performing the Brahms Horn Trio, one of the great works of musical literature. The concert was in the Social Hall on a Sunday afternoon. Now that I think how difficult it was, I can't imagine I played it. It was a wonderful occasion. Hence, I started performing a large number of times in the context of being a faculty member. The piano faculty consisted of Merrill Bradshaw, Robert Smith (part-time piano and part-time English), and myself. We

didn't see Robert very much and I really didn't know him very well. I don't remember if there were any graduate students in piano. It seems as if there were not that many students.

I also remember that there was only one solo recital the first year I taught; Jolane Laycock. Now, fifty years later, one is challenged to schedule the halls as there are so many concerts. This represents the great development of the Brigham Young University School of Music.



My office on the lower campus was a huge room in the basement that could be used as a classroom. There was nothing “officy” about it. It had a piano in it, and I was the sole occupant of that space. Others might have used the room, but I never saw them. J.J. Keeler was across the hall; Merrill Bradshaw taught on the same level. Incidentally, when the roof leaked, the rain came all the way to the basement.

I occupied this space for three years, until the new Fine Arts Building was finally dedicated in 1964. I also had a small adjunct office in Social Hall where I could work, though I hardly remember it. I do remember the classroom. It didn't seem like I stayed at the Social Hall very long, as I tried to efficiently instruct and then move on to my next assignment, teaching piano.

I do remember some of my students, including Newell Dayley and David Randall, both of whom later became colleagues and eventually Chairmen of the School of Music.

Pollei teaching a piano class

They were in my theory class. I think I still have some of their written assignments among my papers.

I taught Theory throughout my years at BYU until I left in 1972 to seek a doctorate. I took a three-year sabbatical, and until that time I taught what was called *Honors Theory*. That was one of the highlights of my teaching career, as I was allowed to develop the plans for this class. To become a student in this class you had to have advanced musical skills. I had *very* good students. One of the best was Ronald Staheli—and I still have his book of exercises. I had learned at Eastman that if you want to teach a “compositional” style, you request, “Compose in the style of” I replicated that principle in my

own way. Students had to compose in the style of every composer—Bach, Brahms, Beethoven, whoever. I especially favored twentieth century composers, or more contemporary, instead of composers of traditional literature. Those projects were very, very exciting.

We also used to sing a lot, and I always had students find their own text and write hymns and chorales. I remember that one boy was actually expelled from school because he plagiarized. He tried to pass off a Bach chorale, but when I looked at it, I said, “I may not know all of Bach’s chorales, but I know them well enough to know that this is one of them.” I researched and researched, then confronted him. I said, “You just transposed this into another key and passed it off as a chorale of your own. Sorry, but no thanks.” He was a challenge, and was eventually removed from campus.

I had wonderful students, and I have wonderful memories from that class. These were very good students who have gone on to become excellent musicians.

After that period, I was very happy to become part of an interesting procedural practice at BYU. When I first came to BYU, we had a certain system of enrolling to study music. Registration for classes in the Smith Fieldhouse seemed like the “dark days” at BYU. You signed up for your lesson, and if you wanted to request, let’s say, piano lessons, you looked at the list of teachers. You had to pay an extra fee to take lessons. If you studied with teacher A, you paid fifty dollars; if you studied with teacher B, you paid fifty-five dollars, for teacher C, seventy-five dollars, and so on—that’s how all the teachers were graded. Then you stood in line to pick up a card for the teacher you chose.

Over the years, I kept saying, “This is not right! There’s something very wrong with the system. It implies that such and such a teacher is better than another teacher and that just doesn’t work.”

Then came people to the faculty such as Glenn Williams, a fabulous faculty colleague. He and I were very close in many, many ways—as friends, and as colleagues who saw eye-to-eye on many details and principles. He became the “Coordinator of Private Lessons”. *Finally*, on what I view as one of the red-letter days in the history of the music department, we passed a motion that “all fees will be the same, i.e... *All music teachers are created equal.*” We wanted no discrimination because of fees. It changed everything—and I guess that’s why I’m making such a strong case for its importance.

Harold Goodman was a very strong Chairman. (I give him credit for helping to start the Gina Bachauer International Piano Competition.) I returned to BYU in 1975, when James Mason was the chair. I give Jim Mason, while he was chair, credit for making the Bachauer Competition what it is today, because he momentarily discontinued the competition, owing to finances and budgeting concerns at BYU. As a result I went into shock. *How could this be?! We’d been successful for five years; however, he was very businesslike about it.* He said, “Let’s just put it on the table until we find a sponsor. Next item on the agenda?” And that was the end of the meeting. As I said, I left the meeting in shock, thinking, *This is the end of the Bachauer.* We obviously had no sponsor, and I didn’t think there would ever be one.

I did know I had one thing: I had a grand piano promised me for the first prize for the next competition. I said, “I will *not*

give that piano back to the donor. I'm keeping it, and we're going to find a sponsor!" And that's exactly what happened. I tramped the streets of Salt Lake City, and the sponsor turned out to be the Utah Symphony for the next six years. That sponsorship made the competition grow; then turned it into the beginnings of a superb new organization. I always teased Jim that he killed us, and then resurrected us.

As I said, I left in 1972 to do my doctoral studies at Florida State University. I was there for three years, working toward a DMA. I was nearly finished with my coursework at Florida State, so I just waited it out and took my final few classes. My consulting professor asked me, "Why don't you get a PhD?"

I asked them, "What's that?"

"It's a different degree."

"Why would I do that?" I asked.

"Because you have the time."

"Is that a good reason?"

"Well, do it."

"What does it involve?"

"Write a dissertation."

"Oh, how do you do that?"

"I'll help you. Don't worry. You're going to write a good dissertation. I'll help you choose a subject. You're not going to write a 500-page dissertation but a 100-page dissertation. I don't believe in 500-page dissertations. I believe in synthesizing it down to the essentials. You'll tell me what the essentials are in 100 pages".

"Okay," I told him. Because I'd never felt competent as a writer, that became one of the great experiences of my life. He bled in red pencil all through my draft chapters. I said to him one day when he showed me one of the chapters, "I can see, I'm not a good writer, am I?"

He said, "You're one of the better ones."

"What does that mean?"

"The ones I'm afraid of are the ones who don't write anything. They can't find any words. You don't have any trouble with words."

My dissertation was on the subject of the virtuoso style of the eight piano concertos of Camille Saint-Saëns. Everybody thinks there are only five concerti, but there are three one-movement works in addition to the five.

The dissertation process was a wonderful experience for me. When I came out of it, I felt that maybe I could write. I had become a better writer than when I started it. My advisor was a fantastic coach. I profited greatly from the experience and his advice.

After studying at Florida State University for three years, I came back to BYU! The piano faculty consisted of me, Robert Smith, who had gone from being a part-time teacher of English and Piano to full-time status, and Reid Nibley, who joined after I did. When I left, Richard Anderson took my place for three years—which had been the plan for my leave. Upon my return, he left to get his own doctorate.

We also had many "special instructors" in piano. At that time, there may have been more than a dozen of them. The position is now called "adjunct faculty." Marlene Bachelder, Mona Smith, Gladys Gladstone and Lowell Farr (from the U.

of U.), Donna Turner Smith (from California)—all were wonderful teachers. We then imported several teachers from Europe, one from South America, and one from Hungary. They came for a year as “visiting faculty.” In the 1970s, the school grew steadily and had much improvement.

When I returned from my doctorate, I thought I might be asked to teach theory. I asked, “Who is teaching the Honors Theory course?” This was a joke: Merrill Bradshaw, in charge of theory and composition at that time (and he had earlier been on the piano faculty), said, “The theory students are all on their honor.”

”Excuse me?” I said to him. “What did you just say? I think we’re talking about two different things.”

I could never get to first base on that point. I had no influence on any discussions, because I was not on the theory and composition faculty.

It was then that everything started to departmentalize. I can say that what I enjoyed most, and what I felt the very best about, was that I was asked to create a pedagogy program. I actually knew what that meant, because my graduate assistantship as a student at Florida State University was to be a pedagogy teacher. I had to create a pedagogy program there, even without knowing much about the process. Yet I felt competent enough to try to do it, and I did it. It sort of worked, and I felt all right about it. When I came back to BYU, I thought, *I can certainly do it here*. The pedagogy program at BYU was one of the areas I felt happiest about during my years at BYU.

You’ve created a significant library in pedagogy.

When I “retired” last year, making the decision so quickly, I was told that I had until July 1 to vacate my office. I asked my children and others to come help me empty my office. I told them, “There’s more in it than you think.” Yes, there *was* a lot—a hundred crates, all placed in the hall outside my office. I said to Norene, “I’m bringing home a hundred crates.”

She said, “No, you’re not. You’ve already *brought* home a hundred crates over the years. There is no more room in our house for any more. Don’t bring one thing home.”

So I just closed my eyes and said, “Take it all to the library, as a gift—a huge gift, in the sense that the repertory in those boxes is so valuable.” Every place I went, I bought music—in Europe, Brazil, and Armenia. In the last two places, I bought out an entire music store. I said, “Give me your whole stock. I’ll take it home.” I feared it would not be there the next time I came.

Tell a little about some of the powerfully creative things you done, aside from your teaching. You’ve been a fabulous performer. As part of that, you developed an eight-hand duo-piano group, involving four people.

That’s quite a story. One day I said to myself, *I should try to remember my students over the years, not just forget them*. So I put them all on a computer. If a student gave a concert, or did a senior recital, or won a competition, or just did something extraordinary, I put that student’s name into this program. These are not *all* of my students, but these are the ones who succeeded, who did something stellar or unique. The most distinguished ones are people like Ron Staheli and Mack Wilberg (who I taught when he was a little boy). Also, there are former students who are

now on music faculties throughout the United States. It's gratifying to look at what these people have accomplished.

Recently, at the Bachauer festival, a lady came up to me, and I had no recollection of her, though I could tell she knew me. When she introduced herself, her name meant nothing to me. She added, "I was in your first piano class at BYU." She didn't seem offended because I couldn't remember her. She was very pleasant, saying, "I know it was your first piano class!"

I teased her: "So, describe the room where you took your lessons." She passed my impromptu quiz.

A male student by the name of Dwight walked into my office one day and said, "Grandma just cleaned her basement." That's all he said. He had a big box in hand. His grandmother had said, "This box is all full of music, and it's not going to do me any good. You take it. It's yours. You can have it."

Dwight said to me, "There are some real treasures in this box, some great things."

I said to him, "Good. Congratulations. Start your own music library."

"But there's one work I don't know what to do with. I can't figure it out, so I'm giving it to you to figure out."

He took the composition out of the box and put it on the piano. It stayed there for a long time, doing nothing! One day as I was cleaning my piano, I looked at the work and asked myself, *What is this? It needs four players.* Then I realized *this is by*

Liszt! My thoughts were, *Hmm, interesting.* So I called Mack Wilberg and Ron Staheli: "Come here!" I had two pianos in my office, so I invited one other pianist and said, "Let's sight read this together."

It was the fabulous Rakoczy March. Our playing nearly lifted the roof off the Fine Arts Building, it was so wonderful! I contemplated, "If there's one of these eight-hand pieces in print, there have to be two." Something triggered us to figure that out. We found another composition by Ingolf Dahl, who taught at Southern California University, titled "Quadlibet on American Folk Tunes". We learned that selection, and we played the Liszt, and we prepared a Halloween recital with exactly two compositions!

We formerly performed midday concerts in the Harris Fine Arts Atrium with Professor Jacob Bos, the coordinator who organized two pianos for us. Norene was, at that time, the Costume Director for theater. I told her, "You doll us up in formal top hats and capes." We put costumes on two students, and then all of us marched very ceremoniously from the top floor down to the main floor. The students carried beautiful silver platters in a very formal manner. We treated the students as our servants. Then we sat down and played our two pieces as our recital.

People later came up to us on campus and said, "Wow! That was really something. When is your next recital?"

We told them, "We don't have any more music."

We then put it in our minds to search for music and actually found additional titles. We eventually built a library of three hundred works, most of which we've catalogued.

Following our beginnings, Mack Wilberg wrote his first arrangement, "The Stars and Stripes." He then wrote the "Carmen Fantasy." He has since written about six more works for us. Then, other composers-arrangers began writing for us.



We had a little contest among ourselves to choose a name for our group. I would go to the Bachauer office and ask people, "Anybody have an idea for a name?" Somehow the name "The American Piano Quartet" came up, and I said, "Not bad. Let's go for it."

The group now has quite a reputation and notoriety. When did it begin?

In 1984.

The quartet has made recordings since then.

That's right. We've just finished our fifth or sixth. I am now the only original member. From the original members, Ronald Staheli, Mack Wilberg, Jeff Shumway, and me, Ron was the first to leave, and we were desperate for a replacement. Del Parkinson worked with us for quite a few years. Then we brought in Massimiliano Frani, Robin Hancock, Doug Humphreys, and others. There have been a total of nine different members.

These colleagues have always been very comfortable to work with. The group

today consists of **Robin Hancock, me, Jeff Shumway, and Scott Holden.**

Another significant thing you've done is to have created the Gina Bachauer International Piano Competition and Festivals.

The way in which the Festivals were created was a miracle. I came home one day from a festival at the University of Maryland, which was a combined festival and competition. I went to dinner with David Randall, when he was doing a clarinet/piano concert. We invited a woman from the faculty at the university and her husband for dinner. She drank a lot—our wine and her wine. A very enthusiastic person, she asked us, "Don't you have a pretty big school in Provo?" She didn't know much about BYU, but enough to say something like that. She continued, "Why don't you start a festival at your school, and invite artists?"

Not a bad idea, I thought.

This was in 1975, and my goal in beginning the first festival in 1976 was to introduce our students to the international piano world, knowing they might never get to New York, London, or Paris. I wanted them to enjoy what I had enjoyed. So I thought *let's bring the artists to us*, and yes, we brought the world to us. We held the festival at BYU for five years.

The initial name given was the Brigham Young University Piano Festival and International Competition. About the third year, many people said to me, "Why don't you give it a good name?"

I said, "Excuse me? It has a name."

"No, you need something 'dazzling,' something with a little flash."

I was a little insulted, thinking people didn't appreciate Brigham Young University; however, they were actually just throwing out ideas. I thought to myself, *Who do I name this festival after?* I was pretty naïve in the business. Finally, a friend put a bug in my ear. I want to say it was Ian McKay. Believe or not, Gina Bachauer was famous in Utah (she had her start at BYU, though nobody remembers that). She played eight times with Maurice Abravanel, hence she was famous in Utah. She had an honorary doctorate from the University of Utah, a citation from the governor, and frequent official receptions for her. Yes, she was very well known and she was a magnificent pianist. Her manager called her "Queen of the Pianists." Also, she played 150 concerts every year, as described in her biography. People told her to slow down, but she said, "If I slow down, my public will forget me." That was one of her standard rebuttals.

We had a great idea, but I was concerned on how would I go about carrying it out.

She had already passed away before the festival started.

I was told to write to her husband, who I discovered was a famous conductor in London. So I wrote to him. We have a very nice, brief letter mounted in our office which says, "I would be honored to give you permission to use the name of Gina Bachauer. I'm very happy for this. Sincerely, Alec Sherman."

He came to all festivals prior to his passing. He also served on our international jury. That's how the name came about, and it's done us well. We're very happy with it. We've now been doing the festival for thirty-four years.

What's the outcome of the festival? What does the Gina Bachauer Competition do for participants?

The first thing competitors want, more than the money we give them, is help with their career—attention, so their name gains notoriety. The concert artist business is very cruel to people who say, "I want to be a concert artist." It's not something you just jump into and do; you have lots and lots of influential contacts and other ways to navigate in the world of artists. So not only do we hand winners a check, we also try to make helpful contacts for them with various people.

We later started junior competitions, which have been fascinating, because some of the junior winners have come back to the main competition. One example is our very tall Mormon boy, Steven Beus. He now lives in Provo as his wife is studying opera and voice at BYU. He won the Junior Competition, and then came back and won the Artists Competition. We're very proud of his great accomplishment, as he was also a returned missionary.

Douglas Humpherys, now Chairman of Piano at Eastman School of Music, was the first winner. Also, Mack Wilberg has performed in the Bachauer competition. He made a very fast ascent, and is a very highly respected musician.

Mack Wilberg has combined his piano career with his distinction of world famous composers/arrangers as well as becoming conductor of the Tabernacle Choir. David Randall says that Mack was the best clarinetist he ever auditioned at BYU, though that's not well known.

Here's a good story for history: I'll never forget the day when Mack went to USC to do his graduate work. A lonely master's student, he called and asked me, "When are you coming to see me? You can stay at my place." He was not married at the time. We went down, and I will never forget that evening. We sat on his bed and traded stories most of the night. The fascinating thing is that even though he's very shy and turns red when he's embarrassed (though he never does that with me), he said to me, "Paul, do you think you could—? Do you think you know any publishers who could do anything about something I've written?"

I asked him, "What have you written?"

"I've written a set of duets, twelve different pieces, each in a different key."

They were what we call *teacher-student duets*—the teacher plays the accompanying and the student plays the little five finger melodies. These were very clever. (This book is still on the music market.)

I said to him, "Sure, I'll get these published for you. I'm sure I could find somebody." Which I did.

He was embarrassed to have to ask me to help him find someone, and now he's the

number-one choral arranger/composer in the world. He publishes with Oxford University Press. That's a miracle story—it was meant to be.

The Gina Bachauer Competition has brought much notoriety to BYU, because you brought it here.

I was sad when it was "kicked out" of BYU, but it turned out to be the best thing that happened to it. And maybe it's been a good thing for me, given my many responsibilities at BYU.

You chaired the piano faculty for years.

We kind of rotated that position, but I served my share of years.

Do you still perform as a soloist?

Rarely. Though I do play in the American Piano Quartet, I adjudicate, and I give lectures all over the world—in China, Japan. I've been on every continent except Africa.

What's coming up for you?

The "big" competition will take place next year. We audition all over the world to find our contestants. We go to the potential participants. We started to do that several years ago, for the juniors and for what we call the "big" competition. This year we are going to Tokyo, Beijing, Hong Kong, Moscow, Venice, Hamburg, New York, London and Salt Lake City. The Asians have taken music to heart. You'll see this trend in major music magazines. I've seen the written statistic that seventy-five million Chinese play the piano, though that's hard to imagine. They are disciplined people. The best book to read on that is *The Lang Lang autobiography*, because people say, "I want to be another

Lang Lang, who has become an icon of success.” He is now fully internationalized and probably earns \$50,000 each time he walks on stage.

What are Paul Pollei’s goals now?

I don’t know. I’m still building, and I don’t give up too easily. I still teach. I work at the Bachauer office in downtown Salt Lake City almost every day. I still accept invitations to adjudicate or lecture. I often try to think of how to help music in the Church. I’ve been on the sidelines, sort of, by watching Mack Wilberg grow into his position, and I stood right there as he did it. That’s the biggest contribution the School of Music has made for the Church at the present time. I can think of no more potent force than that right now: listening to and being involved with the Tabernacle Choir is an incredible thing. I know this for a fact: the Choir does this every week, and yes, we always invite our international guests to the Sunday broadcasts. When the Spirit strikes them, there’s not a dry eye among the visitors. To watch fellow musicians—people who have performed throughout the world—sit and watch, with teared-up eyes, you know it is God’s message. I find that fantastic.

The one sad thing for me is how music in the Church itself has decreased and lost emphasis. I use those words—and I use those words strongly—because I grew up with a Primary teacher who stayed with six boys (we called ourselves the “Big Six,” and she was the mother of one of the boys) and made us do music as part of Primary. Five of the Six are still, to this day, friends and colleagues. She followed us all the way through until we went on our missions. We had to sing, play solos, and do everything musical. Everybody I knew in my junior and senior high school

did music, and if you didn’t you were one of the few. Now it’s just the opposite.

I’m now the ward organist, a calling I’ve had since I was thirteen years old. I can’t find a substitute—there are no young musicians in my ward who are strong enough to play hymns. I don’t think many young people are studying music. And I hear replications of that story all over the Church—a sad, sad commentary. I don’t know how or why that has happened.

We require organ students to have a good piano background and that makes the challenge even harder.

There may not be pianos or organs in future building of the Church. I’m sorry to be a bearer of bad tidings, but how can it be otherwise? Electronic music will take over. Somebody will push the button, and we’ll all sing. When I learned music as a young student, our pianos were special, heavy, valuable, and important. There were no electronic pianos or recordings of hymns to help us sing. We had pianos, organs, choirs, and teachers!

What can we do about that possibility?

That’s a good question. I wonder if the people who teach at BYU ever think about this as a unit. Some of us think about it individually, but do we ever address the issue? I’ve never heard it addressed. Do “we” as faculty members ever gather and say, “Folks, we’ve got a problem. We’ve got to help the Church!” We *are* the Church, musically. We should be the teachers and leaders to show members and converts how to do good music. But we don’t seem to get around to the challenge.

Your experience has been wide and deep musically, but it has also been wide and deep spiritually. In your

image as a member of the Church, you take dignity wherever you go—people know who and what you are. There’s that Church side to your career, which is significant. That comes from living a good life, a life of honor and dignity—which you have done. Because of who may read this interview in the decades to come, when all of us are long gone, people will want to know a little about Paul Pollei—who he was. Would you mind sharing with us your testimony?

That would be a pleasure. I’ll begin by saying that I received a phone call at the end of April General Conference this year (2009) from a man who identified himself as a Korean who had just been named as a member of the First Council of the Seventy. He said he had obtained my name through Mack Wilberg, who conducted music at General Conference. Mack is very famous in Korea, because of his mission and music experiences.

Following General Conference, this newly-appointed Korean General Authority went to Mack and said, “I would like to ask your advice about my son. My son is an advanced pianist, and I would like some advice and help about his future.”

Mack replied, “Don’t talk to me. I don’t know anything about piano.” (You can just hear Mack saying something like that.) “I recommend that you talk to Paul Pollei. He could probably help you.”

“Well, how do I find him?” the Korean asked.

“I’ll give you his phone number.”

“Is it all right if I call him?”

“Oh, sure. No problem.”

So I received a phone call from Brother Choi, who said, “Could my wife and I come and visit with you?”

I said, “Yes. What is this about?”

He said, “We would like to talk to you about our son and his piano study.”

I told him, “Sure. Please come anytime!

They were going to remain in Salt Lake City for a few days, so they came to my office right away. We had a lovely visit. The story was their son was a returned missionary, and he was now in a position where he needed to continue his education. They wanted to know what would be the best next step for him. He had finished preliminary, or fundamental, music studies in Korea. In other words, it sounded as if he was ready for a master’s degree in piano.

I asked the couple, “What are his preferences?”

Their son, Sunbeam Choi, could speak English, as part of his mission was English speaking. I gave him a list of some schools that would probably be appropriate for him, including BYU, the University of Utah, and some other fine schools. I also told him that I would be happy to help him anytime I could.

The son did stay in touch with me, and he did apply to BYU, along with many other schools. He was not accepted at BYU, because he didn’t pass his TOEFL test—which was quite surprising. I suppose the test was harder than he had calculated. You have to do some writing in English, and the procedure didn’t work.

So young Sunbeam Choi applied to the other schools, and he was admitted to the Peabody Conservatory of Music, in

Baltimore, Maryland. In fact, we had Masters Classes as part of our festival this year at the Bachauer (we planned a festival rather than a competition). He participated in the festival, and it was nice to hear him perform and to become reacquainted with him.

In the meantime, between April and the present time (July 2009), my associate at the Bachauer foundation and I did auditions for the Junior Bachauer Competition, which was held last year. We went to the home of the Choi's in Korea and had dinner with them. They are a lovely family, and they treated us well. They planned a fireside in their church building that evening. Former Korean students of mine, who are now residing in Korea, are married and played for the fireside with children. It was bringing the world together, so to speak, and that was very pleasant. Sunbeam Choi and his wife are now married and have a child, and they live in Baltimore, Maryland.

Here is a case of what I'll call "The Mormon World" branching out and having the opportunities to do something. I hope he has very good success as a master's student at Peabody.

Speaking of Asians and music, I'm very happy to say and am intrigued with the fact, that so many of them are loving music so much, while so *many* Caucasians in our country do not love music as much. In my estimation, this is a very distressing observation, and I don't have the answer to what that is all about. I don't know where our culture will lead us next. But the Asians are doing very well in their quest for musical success.

I find it fascinating that the student could not come to the BYU School of Music but could go to Peabody and be

successful. Now he can come here afterwards.

I have another student who is from Russia. She was "hand-carried" to me by the sister of Clyn Barrus, LaRue, whose husband was a mission president in Russia. They brought this girl back from their mission and, so to speak, put her "right in my studio," saying, "Paul, you teach her. She needs you. She's very well trained in the Russian system, but now she's here on her own, and she needs help. Can you do something for her?"

I said, "I will try."

She sat down and played the Brahms First Concerto, as an audition for me. She was anxious to do well. She has married a nice boy, a returned missionary, and they are doing well.

"What should I do next?" she asked me.

I said, "You must finish school. Start at BYU, or at the U. of U. We'll go from there."

As BYU wouldn't accept her because, following an evaluation of all her credits from an international school (some institution in Minnesota does the evaluations), the report was, "She does not have enough American history," or "She doesn't have enough math," or something. I think BYU said, "She has too much of everything. We can't admit her as an undergraduate."

She is a very fine pianist, but BYU would not admit her. I found something very wrong about that. The U. of U. agreed to admit her, but they told her, "You have to find out who George Washington was, and you have to do your math," etc!

Russian music training is much different from American training, and the girl strongly desires to earn a music degree. She plays very well. We're in for some real surprises, though I don't know how all this is going to play out as far as the Church goes, and I'm not prepared to predict the future.

We do know that the principles and values are good.

Very, very good. If we read Brother Callister's talk in a recent *Ensign*, we see how he encourages families to go for the highest in literature, art, and music. How can we turn young people away from that? We can't. I don't think I'm smart enough to predict what the future will be. I only know that some music we hear (and I will not say what kind) is not very uplifting.

There *is* good music out there, and there are good teachers, and there are wonderful opportunities, but they are far and few between, compared to what they used to be. The Church, in all its glory and growth, is losing ground in music, even though music seems to be a key element in the Church. We need to do more to promote good music.

Pollei: I would say that the fact that the Church has started an orchestra is hopeful. There was none when I was growing up—the Church dipped in that idea, but it never worked very well. We also have a magnificent choir, and they are of superior quality. We don't have to apologize for anything going on at the present time. If we can't attach our hearts and minds and efforts to what is happening, that which the prophets have organized, then something is wrong with us. I think we're not putting it all together. I'm fearful that parents are not taking advantage of teaching their children, or

seeing that their children are introduced and taught. Too much or too little teaching is done by internet and television.

I have two children, and only one is married, but I do have two grandsons. These little boys are doing well on the computer, but they aren't musical yet. I keep thinking that one might change his mind, but they are still small children. There still hope.

I never *lacked* a testimony. It was born with me, and it developed all during my life. Everything I've been able to do was always the result of some promise taught to me by my parents. I can still hear my mother saying, "If you don't do *that*, it will be taken away." That was always a little bit of a threat, but also a very wise suggestion. It kept me thinking. "If you don't shape up, maybe you will turn into a rascal." We come from that kind of a family that always taught *you have to keep working*.

My mother is from the Cannon family, an interesting heritage, the roots of the Church. The Polleis were German, and the name is an odd German name. People can't quite pin it to Germany. It's from Stettin, which is from Poland, but the Polleis spoke German. They came to America in 1904, after the family joined the Church in Germany. We have photographs of the whole German ward, and it was a large ward in what-is-now Poland. The Polleis reunited with their family in Salt Lake City, who had already immigrated. There was a good family connection. My grandfather came to help build the Utah State Capitol Building.

There are no other musicians in my immediate family of three brothers, nor among my other relatives, except Tracy Y. Cannon. That "Y" stands for *Brigham Young*, his grandfather.



*A Pollei music theory class
The Neapolitan Cord*